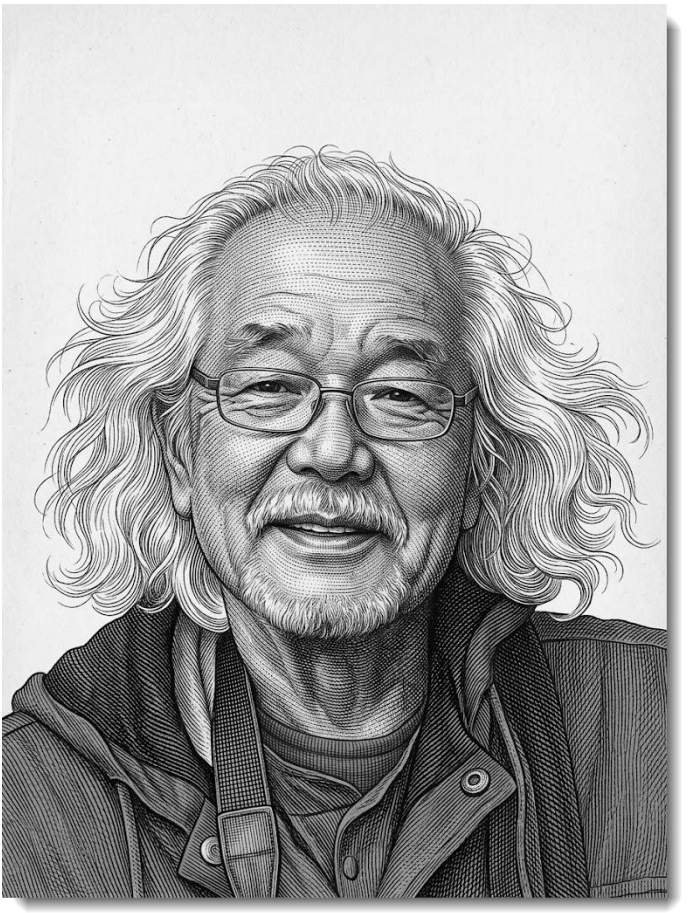
TRUC CHI TON THAT KY

From "Anh" to "Bac," From *Here and There* to *Wood and Stone*



Trúc Chi Tôn Thất Kỳ

There are people who come to mind the moment we hear that they are ill.

And then there are people we remember through the smallest things.

A sentence they once said. A smile. A dinner with friends. A conversation about books. A handshake. Even the way we addressed them.

Sometimes, oddly enough, what we remember most is a question of addressing.

That is how I find myself thinking tonight about Truc Chi Ton That Ky, the Vietnamese writer and journalist, after hearing that he has been seriously ill and has spent several weeks in the hospital. He is now receiving hospice care in Alhambra, California.

I called our mutual friend, the writer Huy Van, hoping to learn more. There was little he could tell me. Truc Chi, he said, was extremely weak. He could no longer read and spent most of his time on a ventilator.

I wanted to visit, but that was not possible.

So I did what a writer does when there is no other way to reach a friend: I wrote.

Not a eulogy. Truc Chi is still with us. Just a few memories of a man I once knew as an older friend—someone who was, for a while, simply “anh Truc Chi” to me, and then, rather unexpectedly, became “Bac Truc Chi.”

That little change in vocabulary has a story behind it.

And it still makes me smile.

A Prince Who Never Acted Like One

Truc Chi Ton That Ky occupies a distinctive place in the Vietnamese literary and journalistic community in Southern California and in the Vietnamese diaspora more broadly.

He was a journalist and writer, and, by his own account, worked in his younger years as a reporter and correspondent for the BBC and the Associated Press.

But his family background was even more remarkable. His grandfather belonged to Vietnam's imperial family and, according to Truc Chi, once served as regent for the former emperor Bao Dai.[1]

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[1] The grandfather of the writer Trúc Chi was Tôn Thất Hân, a member of the Tôn Thất royal family of the Nguyễn Dynasty. He was a descendant of Nguyễn Phúc Trân (阮福溱), the Cương Quận Công and the third son of Lord Nguyễn Phúc Tần (阮福瀕), belonging to the fifth generation of the Tôn Thất lineage.

In 1925, when Emperor Khải Định died, Tôn Thất Hân was selected through consultations between the French Indochinese government and several high-ranking Nguyễn court officials to serve as a senior regent and royal counselor to Emperor Bảo Đại. At the time, Bảo Đại was studying in France, and Tôn Thất Hân effectively served as regent, overseeing the kingdom's political, diplomatic, and military affairs until Bảo Đại returned to Vietnam in 1932.

Tôn Thất Hân died in 1944. After his death, Emperor Bảo Đại posthumously elevated him to the title of Phò Quang Quận Vương (扶光郡王). He was therefore also known as the Regent Prince.

You might expect someone from such a background to carry himself with a certain formality.

Truc Chi did but he never seemed to use his family history to make himself important. His family had been raised in the old Confucian tradition, where courtesy was not merely good manners. It was a way of life.

I remember what Professor Tran Huy Bich said to us at the funeral of Truc Chi's mother.

“Look at Truc Chi,” he said. “He is standing behind his older brother, hands folded respectfully, while his brother talks with visitors. He has preserved the old Confucian manner perfectly.”

It was a small gesture but it said a great deal. Truc Chi did not need to announce who he was. His upbringing spoke for him.

Yet there was another Truc Chi—the one we saw at gatherings of writers and friends. There he was relaxed, gentle, and quietly funny.

He could talk to someone decades older or decades younger without making the difference in age feel important. His humor was never loud or showy. It was the kind that arrived almost unnoticed—a small turn of phrase, a knowing smile, a remark delivered so mildly that you might miss the joke if you weren't paying attention.

That was the Truc Chi I came to know.

... The Day I Met "Anh Truc Chi"

I first met him toward the end of 2014, through the writer Tram Ca Mau, a fellow native of Hue.

There were connections everywhere. Tram's older brother, as I recall, had also been a schoolmate of Truc Chi's. The Vietnamese literary world is a small one. The Hue literary world is smaller still.

At the time, a group associated with the literary magazine *Van Hoc* was trying to find a reliable way to digitize the magazine's entire archive, including *Van Hoc Nghe Thuat*, founded and edited by the late writer Nguyen Mong Giac, who had died about a year earlier.

Truc Chi was one of the remaining members of the editorial group and had been especially close to Nguyen Mong Giac. He was deeply invested in preserving the magazine.

The first attempt at digitization had not produced satisfactory results.

That's where I came in.

Tram Ca Mau introduced me to the group, and at my first meeting I sat down with Truc Chi and the writer Huy Van.

We talked. We laughed. We discussed books and literature.

And, as often happens in Vietnamese literary circles, especially among people of different generations who have become friends, we immediately called one another "anh"—a respectful but friendly term roughly corresponding to "older brother."

So I called him "anh Truc Chi."

He called me "anh," too.

Nobody thought twice about it.

I explained that digitizing old magazines was not my profession or specialty. I was simply willing to help because I loved Vietnamese literature and believed that someone ought to preserve these fragile records of our literary past before they disappeared forever.

Paper decays.

Ink fades.

Writers die.

But a digitized page can survive.

So we went to work.

... 228 Issues—and One Very Cold Shower

The project moved along smoothly.

There were work sessions, phone calls, meetings, dinners, and long conversations about books and

writers. I gradually felt that I had become part of this circle of literary friends.

By April 2015, all 228 issues had been beautifully scanned, and the files were put online by the late writer Phung Nguyen.

Then Truc Chi asked me to create an interactive table of contents so readers could search the archive by author, article title, genre, and other categories.

I was working on that when Ho Nhu, the group's treasurer, came to see me.

She handed me **$500**.

It was payment for my digitization work.

I have to admit: it felt like someone had thrown a bucket of cold water in my face.

It wasn't the amount.

It was the principle.

From the beginning, I had said I wasn't doing this for money. I was helping because I loved the literature and believed it was worth saving.

If I accepted the money, I would be going against the very reason I had volunteered.

If I refused it, I risked looking self-important.

So I stopped.

Truc Chi then asked Ho Nhu to take over the technical work. She had a degree in computer science from San Francisco State University and was well qualified to do it.

The matter was settled.

But something had changed for me.

I realized that, in the eyes of some people, I was not necessarily a fellow literary friend who had joined them in preserving an important archive.

I was simply "the digitization guy."

So be it.

Life is full of different points of view.

What matters is knowing why you did something in the first place.

... How "Anh" Became "Bac"

After the digitization project was completed, Truc Chi invited members of the *Van Hoc* group and several friends—including Professors Tran Huy Bich and Pham Le-Huong—to dinner at Vy Da Restaurant to celebrate.

It was a happy occasion.

The archive had been preserved. A long and complicated project had succeeded. Everyone was pleased.

Then Truc Chi's wife asked me how old I was.

I told her.

She looked surprised.

“Oh!” she said. “You're the same age as our youngest daughter.”

There was a brief silence.

I had just discovered that I was 32 years younger than Truc Chi.

Until then, “anh Truc Chi” had seemed perfectly natural.

After that evening, I decided it was time for a change.

“Anh” became “bac.”

In Vietnamese, *bac* is a respectful term for an older person, roughly corresponding to “uncle” or “aunt,” though it carries a more complicated social meaning.

Problem solved. Or so I thought.

The same little episode happened again—once at Professor Tran Huy Bich's home and once at Professor Pham Le-Huong's.

I was still calling everyone else “anh” and “chi”—older brother, older sister, friendly terms of respect. But when I turned toward Truc Chi:

“Bac Truc Chi…”

Technically correct.

Socially awkward.

And probably not music to everyone's ears.

Truc Chi understood the situation immediately. He was too tactful to put either his wife or me in an uncomfortable position. So he quietly changed the way he referred to himself. Instead of calling himself “anh,” he simply used “toi”—“I.”

That solved the problem for the two of us.

Perhaps not entirely for everyone else.

From then on, my conversations sometimes sounded like this:

“*Anh* Bich said…”

“*Chi* Huong told me…”

“*Anh* Chinh mentioned…”

And then:

“*Bac* Truc Chi…”

It was, you might say, linguistically correct. But not necessarily socially elegant.

I eventually tried to avoid gatherings where the two of us would have to navigate this little minefield.

Of course, you can't avoid your friends forever. So the situation occasionally returned.

Everyone was “anh” or “chi.”

One person was “bac.”

Vietnamese social etiquette can be complicated.

... Here and There: A Writer Who Knows How to Look

The story of the two books Truc Chi published as a writer—*Do Day* (*Here and There*) and *Go & Da* (*Wood and Stone*)—helps explain why his personality has remained so memorable to his friends.

The table of contents of *Here and There* immediately tells us something about his writing.

The subjects are small.

Chi Dan.
The Imperial Bowl.
“Hanoi” and Hanoi.
Purple Flame Tree.
A Touch of Autumn.
Two Farewells and a Few Unfinished Things.
The Carrying Pole.
Conversations.
A Rainy Day.
Hue, One Rainy Night.
Fragments.
Dipping Sauce.
Near the End of the Year.
Beside a Letter.
A Few Wild Grass Leaves.

These are not grand subjects.

There are no battlefields, no presidential palaces, no sweeping declarations about history. Instead, Truc Chi notices the little things. And that is often where the best personal essays begin.

A bowl can lead to memory.

A purple flower can open the door to an entire season of life.

A rainy night in Hue can bring back a city that exists now more in memory than in geography.

A letter can resurrect a friendship.

A few blades of grass can become a meditation on time.

That is the magic of the personal essay. A writer doesn't always have to climb a mountain to find something worth writing about. Sometimes he only has to bend down and pick up a leaf.

The title *Here and There* is therefore more than a traveler's phrase. It suggests a life lived in many places and, more importantly, a mind that continues to travel through memory.

... Hue Is More Than a Place

Hue is one of the quiet currents running through Truc Chi's writing. But his Hue is not merely the familiar

postcard: the Perfume River, the Truong Tien Bridge, the rain, the purple dresses.

Hue is also a way of living.

A way of remembering.

A way of speaking.

A way of observing social boundaries.

And sometimes, a way of saying something without saying it.

That seems especially meaningful in the case of Truc Chi, whose family background and Confucian upbringing were such an important part of his early life. He grew up within one tradition and later worked in an international world of journalism, living through enormous changes in Vietnam and the Vietnamese diaspora.

Those worlds inevitably meet in his writing.

So the Hue in his essays is not simply geography. It is temperament. And temperament is one of the hardest things for a writer to capture.

... Wood and Stone: Memory Gets Heavier

If *Here and There* often looks outward, *Wood and Stone* seems more inward.

Its table of contents is darker, quieter:

Fragile.
Letter to a Crane.
An Address.
Old Friends and Yellow Lamplight.
A Visit to a Friend.
Clouds and March.
Song Beneath the Waves.
A Vegetarian Lunch Box.
"I" and Lu Xun.
Hong Cloud.
The Seed.
A Little Sunshine and a Little Love.
The Final Chapter.
On an Artist's Soul.
Wood and Stone.

There is something about these titles that feels older.

"Old friends."

"A visit."

"The final chapter."

"An artist's soul."

These are words touched by *time*.

For someone of Truc Chi's generation, time isn't an abstract idea. It is the friend who is no longer there. The address where nobody lives anymore. The voice that has gone silent. The city that has changed. The artist who has passed away. The life that once seemed permanent but turned out to be temporary.

That is where the title *Wood and Stone* becomes especially evocative.

Wood has grain.

Stone bears marks.

Both record time. But wood was once alive, while stone appears lifeless.

One can decay.

The other can endure.

And between them stands the human being—fragile as wood, yet always hoping to leave something behind that will last like stone.

... "I" and Lu Xun

One of the most intriguing titles in *Wood and Stone* is *"I" and Lu Xun.*

The quotation marks around "I" are significant.

The personal essay is, by nature, a form of autobiography. But the best personal essays do not shout, "Look at me!" The writer stands slightly to one side and looks at the world—and then discovers himself reflected in it.

Lu Xun, one of modern China's most influential writers, was known for his sharp and often unsparing observations of human nature and society.

By placing “I” beside Lu Xun, Truc Chi seems to be placing himself in conversation with another writer, with literature, and perhaps with his own younger self.

This is where we see that Truc Chi is not merely a storyteller.

He is a reader.

And, ultimately, he is someone who reads life through books.

... Conversations with the People Who Made a Time

The appendices to *Wood and Stone* add another dimension.

There are conversations with the renowned singer Minh Trang and the composer Le Trong Nguyen, followed by *Truc Chi: Hue-Saigon-Hanoi, Trieu Hoa Dai*.

These pieces reveal another side of the author.

A writer who only talks about himself can eventually become a man talking to a mirror. Truc Chi prefers conversation.

With friends.

With artists.

With people from an earlier generation.

With people whose lives connect different places and different eras.

Minh Trang is not merely Minh Trang.

Le Trong Nguyen is not merely Le Trong Nguyen.

Hue, Saigon, and Hanoi are not merely three names on a map.

Together they form pieces of a Vietnam that Truc Chi's generation knew firsthand—and that younger generations may know only through stories.

That makes his work valuable not simply as personal reminiscence, but as cultural memory.

... The Man Hidden Inside the Books

The most interesting thing about reading Truc Chi's two collections is that the more he writes about other people, the more we begin to see him.

That is one of the marks of a genuine writer.

He doesn't have to tell us about his imperial family background. He doesn't have to remind us that he worked for the BBC or AP. He doesn't have to put the royal title “Ton That” in front of us and ask us to admire them. Those things are already somewhere behind the sentences.

What we see instead is a man who notices. A man who remembers. A man who cares. And a man who knows when to hold back.

Perhaps the Confucian courtesy Professor Tran Huy Bich noticed at his mother's funeral is not simply a matter of formal behavior.

It also appears in Truc Chi's writing.

A person who is careful with people is often careful with words.

He does not exaggerate.

He does not turn another person's pain into a stage for his own emotions.

And when he jokes, he often jokes just enough to keep life from becoming too solemn.

... A Man Who Knew the Value of Tact

I still remember one sentence from an email Truc Chi sent to our literary group:

"... 2/- Financing: we cannot continue to depend on our friend N.V. ..."

I remember it not because it was about money, but because it showed how tactfully he could handle an awkward subject.

He understood that I was uncomfortable with money being attached to volunteer literary work.

He did not criticize me. He did not make demands. He simply acknowledged reality.

That was Truc Chi.

Kind, but not naïve. Polite, but not passive.

A man shaped by an old tradition of manners who had spent enough time in the modern world to know that life does not always follow the rules.

... The Reluctant Writer

I have always thought that there is a special kind of person in literary circles.

They arrive. They talk. They laugh. They help with something. They remember an old friend. And then they quietly sit back down. They don't need to be the center of attention.

Truc Chi was one of those people.

That is why, tonight, I don't want to write a formal tribute. I simply want to remember a few things.

A meeting in late 2014.

A pile of old magazines.

228 issues of *Van Hoc*.

A digitization project.

A dinner at Vy Da.

A question about my age.

A “bac” replacing an “anh.”

And a gentleman who was always courteous and composed, with just enough mischief in his smile to remind us that courtesy and humor can live comfortably under the same roof.

When I read *Here and There*, I see a Truc Chi looking out the window.

When I read *Wood and Stone*, I see him turning around and looking back at the years behind him.

And when I remember the Truc Chi I knew, I see a man standing somewhere between those two books.

A little *Here and There.*

A little *Wood and Stone.*

A man who traveled through many places, met many people, lived through several chapters of Vietnamese history, and tried to save from oblivion whatever time threatened to take away.

… And Tonight…

Tonight, Truc Chi is in hospice.

I don't know whether he can still hear.

I don't know whether he recognizes the voices of old friends.

I don't know whether, if I were allowed to stand beside his bed, I should say: “Anh Truc Chi…” or “Bac Truc Chi…”

Perhaps I would simply stand there for a moment.

And then, to be safe, I would say: “Bac Truc Chi.”

Just to follow the rules.

But in my heart, I would still remember the “anh Truc Chi” of those earlier days. The older friend I met while working to preserve *Van Hoc*. The friend who talked with me about books, writers, and old acquaintances. The man who made me feel that even though I was not a writer, I could sit among writers and help preserve something that mattered.

Time changed the way I addressed him. It did not change the memory.

His two books remain.

One looks outward.

The other looks inward.

Between them lies a life.

And perhaps that is what writing finally does: *It saves a little piece of a person before that person becomes part of history.*

I don't know whether Truc Chi can read these words tonight.

But I write them anyway.

Some words are not really written for the person lying in the hospital bed.

They are written for memory. And memory doesn't need a ventilator.

It breathes on its own.

Sometimes for a very long time.

Like a purple flame tree.

Like a rainy night in Hue.

Like an old friend beneath a yellow lamp.

Like wood.

Like stone.

And like a word of address that changed from “anh” to “bac,” while the affection behind it never really changed at all.